

From the Baltimore Sun

Fuelishness

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Amid the great wave of political responses to rising gasoline prices - somewhere between the bonehead notions and the shameless pandering - one proposal stands out for the sheer breadth of its positive impact: demanding higher fuel efficiency from motor vehicles.

That single step would make every dollar Americans spend on gas go further, reduce U.S. demand on global oil supplies and U.S. dependence on unstable oil-producing nations, lessen the impact of fossil fuels on global warming and curb pollutants that contribute to asthma and other ailments.

What's more, requiring automakers to use available technology to reach higher miles-per-gallon targets soon could drop the price of gasoline now as oil speculators see the American market beginning to cool.

This long-overdue legislation has strong support in polls, and momentum is finally building for it in Congress. But standing in the way - as it has for two decades - is the alliance of carmakers, union workers and oil producers that fears it would lose out.

Those fears are based on outmoded thinking. It's long past time for lawmakers to recognize these bogus objections for what they are and put drivers first.

Most absurd is the argument promoted both by labor and management that forcing a move away from the SUVs and pickup trucks that have become Detroit's forte will cost jobs. Amazingly, lobbyists are still saying this with a straight face after a decade in which Detroit has been hemorrhaging jobs precisely because it has mostly refused to adapt its products to a market that wants cleaner, more-efficient vehicles.

Also phony is the claim that fuel efficiency can't be achieved without sacrificing safety. Yes, many drivers in smaller vehicles have been hurt in collisions with SUVs. But those big vehicles also have a tendency to roll, which can be just as deadly. Experts say fuel efficiency and safety can be easily combined.

President Bush has recently become an advocate of updating the fuel efficiency standards to set limits by size, which are harder for automakers to game than the current fleetwide average. That makes sense. But Congress should give the reform some teeth by adding specific targets for the auto industry to meet as quickly as possible.

The only time Congress set such targets was in the midst of the 1970s Arab oil embargo. The targets took effect after the embargo ended, yet American oil imports dropped sharply until the late 1980s, when supply pressure was off and the SUV craze began.

This history teaches that imposing fuel efficiency targets was a great idea whose time has clearly come again.